

BOOST YOUR support structure

ARE YOU FOREVER FEELING EXHAUSTED AND STRETCHED IN ALL DIRECTIONS BECAUSE YOU DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF?

As a woman in the modern world, you may find yourself trying to play the role of superwoman: aiming to strike the perfect balance between taking care of your family and running a 'successful' household, all while flourishing in your career and maintaining a vibrant social life and healthy relationship with the gym. This is all well and good, except most of the time you probably do this alone, even with a partner in the house or a close family network. Constant pressure and exhaustion could lead to burnout. Port Elizabeth-based clinical psychologist Christine Slabbert advises that social support can assist in easing some of the everyday struggles parents face, and serves to make the process of coping and asking for help easier.

Why don't moms ask for help?

Christine says there are a number of reasons why moms avoid asking for help, and they differ from woman to woman.

- 1 Social perception that everyone else is coping without assistance:** 'Movies, advertisements, school playground conversations and even social media platforms often only highlight the positive aspects of parenting. This contributes towards a view that other parents are able to manage on their own,' says Christine.
- 2 Fear of failure or inadequacy:** As a mom, you may feel uncomfortable sharing your daily struggles with others because you fear judgement. 'This leads to a distorted perception

that "good parents" have children who are always happy, achieving at school, and under control, which makes it more difficult for those who are struggling to ask for help.'

- 3 Difficulty trusting others:** Are you way too controlling and pedantic? Do you feel no one else will do the job as thoroughly as you would? Unfortunately, this may lead to your partner and those around you never offering to help, because they feel like when they do, it's not appreciated. 'Many parents are concerned that alternative caregivers may not care for their children in the same way they do. Parents who engage in perfectionist tendencies, or who have experienced childhood trauma themselves, find it especially difficult to trust others with the care of their children.'
- 4 Not wanting to bother or burden others:** You may feel your children are your primary responsibility and as such you're uncomfortable asking for help for fear of disappointing, overwhelming or taking advantage of people.
- 5 Lack of time:** Trying to balance multiple demanding roles (work, managing a household, children's extramural activity schedules, caring for and sometimes supporting your parents or siblings in addition to your own children) may leave you with little time to engage in meaningful social interactions of your own. 'Parents often feel socially isolated and don't know how to access support from those around them, or make the time to do so, as a result of being constantly on the go.'

WHY YOU'RE FEELING BURNED OUT

You're doing yourself more harm than good by trying to be superwoman and doing everything on your own. Being an all-rounder can have detrimental effects on your physical and mental health. Christine warns of the following side effects:

- ⦿ Increased risk for burnout and the development, or worsening, of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, alcohol and substance abuse.
- ⦿ Decline in physical health, ranging from reduced immunity to an increased risk for heart disease, due to the physiological effects of ongoing stress on your body.
- ⦿ It may start to affect your career as your performance at work deteriorates.
- ⦿ You may experience increased interpersonal conflict and/or withdrawal from existing relationships.
- ⦿ You may feel a loss of 'sense of self' outside of the parental role; feelings of irritability, isolation, and helplessness.
- ⦿ Decreased self-esteem due to an ongoing sense of being unable to cope
- ⦿ Less resilience to stress over time.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Children whose parents are constantly under pressure also tend to experience higher levels of anxiety and low mood, and are at increased risk for the development of mental health conditions such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse.

Get the help you need

As a working mom, trying to do everything yourself can be impossible; you can't do everything on your own. 'The first step is often the most difficult in terms of asking for help. Many people who are part of our daily lives can, however, provide us with support. We're unlikely to have all of our support needs met by just one person. For example, your mother-in-law may be great at babysitting while a close friend could be more reliable with school trips. It's important to understand that no one is perfect and we all need a helping hand from time to time. Give yourself permission to ask for help and be open to alternative ideas and suggestions,' says Christine.

Build your network

- Ask your spouse to prepare supper twice a week and take turns to visit the grocery store after work. Ask them to monitor homework hour or take your daughter to her ballet class.
- Ask the older kids to do more chores around the house: washing dishes, tidying up the TV room, helping their younger sibling with homework and school projects.
- Ask your parents or in-laws to fetch the kids from school and take them to extramurals now and again.
- Whenever you have a free afternoon, offer to take your child's friends/teammates home after their netball match if their parents are busy. This will make you more comfortable to ask them for assistance next time you need it, paving the way to building a small network with other school moms where you help each other out once in a while.

- Offer to look after your nieces and nephews while your sister and her husband are away for a few days. That way, they'll be open to doing the same with your kids should you need some quiet time alone.

Feel the weight lift off your shoulders...

Nurturing the relationships around you can help in the long run. Not only will the relief make a world of difference, but the quality of relationships with your family will improve. 'Ultimately, the quality of the relationship you have with your children and spouse is far more important than the number of things you do for them,' says Christine. 'Most children would rather have a happy, well-balanced parent than one who is constantly irritable, on the go, and emotionally depleted as a result of

being unable to delegate responsibilities, set boundaries, and care for themselves. Parents who feel in control of their lives are more consistent and better at setting boundaries. They're also able to model healthy behaviour for their children.'

TIP

If you live far from family and friends, Christine suggests joining local clubs or groups. 'Participating in voluntary or religious groups, engaging in sporting or community activities, joining a skills class, or signing up to online communities may also be helpful alternatives for creating a new support network.'

